
I Wish I Had Known

By

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Starting is Difficult

I started to work in the Office of Defense Cooperation (ODC), Ljubljana, Slovenia, shortly after it opened in 1996, and have been involved in every aspect of the ODC's mission since then. Many times I have wished there was someone I could approach with my questions – a fairy godmother to guide and advise me through this complex and confusing world of security assistance. The purpose of this article is to share the lessons I have learned and the things I wished I had known when I started working in the ODC, with others who might find them useful, especially other training managers and foreign service nationals (FSN).

When I was offered my present position as an international military education and training (IMET) coordinator and budget analyst, I had never even heard of security assistance. The office consisted of a computer and two boxes of catalogs. I knew what to use the computer for, but had no idea what to do with the catalogs beyond using them to fill up a bookshelf. At that time the office was staffed with one active duty Army officer and myself. I was confronted with unknown acronyms, and a “puzzle” of security assistance organizations. Daily I received phone calls from people who claimed they were Slovenia's desk officers. I was trying to fit the names of the security assistance organizations that were little more than abstruse acronyms to me into a mosaic of security assistance. Slowly, with training and experience the picture has become less and less blurry. Soon it became obvious that managing IMET was just a one part of the job. The list of my duties was getting longer every day. Before I knew it, I was a budget analyst, filing manager, publication manager, and when required, a travel guide, translator, secretary and driver. A very dynamic job indeed!

The next rather unclear area in the beginning was the relationship between the American embassy and our office. Despite the office's location in the Ministry of Defense, it is one of the embassy's agencies. According to the International Cooperative Administrative Support Services (ICASS) agreement the embassy has to provide certain services for which they are reimbursed. I have learned that is very useful to have the list of services handy, to consult it when somebody tries to convince you that their office does not need to provide us a certain service.

Each embassy has several military offices involved in seemingly similar, yet subtly distinctive programs. It took me a while to understand the different missions of each of the offices, defense attaché, joint contact team program, and the office of defense cooperation. I have noticed that our Slovene counterparts very often have a hard time distinguishing among various military programs that the U.S. carries out in Slovenia.

There is one thing I have wished more often than anything else in this office that I had some military background. In my opinion, this is the most difficult, if not impossible, to catch up with, because of its complexity and extensiveness. I could list a few pages of the anecdotal examples that have been the result of my military ignorance. Here are some areas where the lack of knowledge was the most obvious and often also embarrassing:

- Ranks (sergeant major is lower than major)
- Units (“Platoon” is not just a movie)

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- Branches (Field Artillery are not tractors)
 - Military life (base, PX, commissary)
 - Military English and acronyms

When one is in charge of preparing students to go to live in a foreign country, he or she is supposed to provide a brief overview on culture and customs of the country. Before I started working in the office I had never been in the U.S., and everything I knew I learned from the movies. Thus my first students were not very well prepared for their big adventure. When going to the U.S. for the first time after several months in the office and seeing my first military base, Wright-Patterson Air Force Base, a place very well known to the security assistance community, my mouth fell open. I had no idea that the bases are so huge, literally towns. Now I understood why some of my students complained about not having a rental car! Without a car, you could hardly get to a bathroom, as I described it to my students after returning home. I finally had an idea of how the mysterious visiting officers quarters looked like, and I could assure them that they will be able to do their own laundry. And shopping! I could give them advice on what they would find in the commissary and PX/BX (Post Exchange/Base Exchange) and that when shopping outside the base, they should not accuse the cashier of cheating when the price on the receipt was higher than the one on the label: The price on the label does not include the tax!

When I look back on my first months in the Office of Defense Cooperation, I wonder how everything worked out so smoothly, without any major problems such as a student at the wrong school or a penalty for a cancelled quota.

Student Processing

Proper preparation of a student for U.S. training undoubtedly creates a favorable attitude toward achieving the objectives for which he is being trained. Therefore, a thorough pre-departure briefing is essential for each student selected for training under IMET.

The Joint Security Assistance Training (JSAT) regulation, chapter 10, section VI *In-Country Pre-Departure Briefings and Training Installation Briefings for International Military Students* describes in detail which topics should be included in the in-country pre-departure briefing. The regulation is understandably very general, because it has to cover international students from all over the world, going to over 150 schools. From my discussions with other training managers, I have learned that aside from certain specific requirements in the JSAT, the process is unique in every country, stemming out of each country's unique characteristics, and those of the training managers who run it.

Since I had no predecessor and at first did not have anybody whom I could ask for advice, I developed my own student processing procedure. It is based upon JSAT, but modified to meet the needs of our office. Described below is how the IMET students are processed in Slovenia. Student processing has been constantly updated and modified, based on the comments of returning students.

The Ministry of Defense and the ODC have divided among themselves the responsibilities for student processing. In Slovenia the Ministry of Defense is responsible for:

- Student selection and compliance with course prerequisites. It is up to the ministry to select a student for the course they requested and to schedule them for English Comprehension Language testing with the ODC. We provide our point of contact within the personnel department of the Ministry of Defense with a course description, including all prerequisites. Beyond that, we

encourage them to follow the student selection guidance set forth in chapter 10 of the *Security Assistance Management Manual*, but as long as the student meets the course prerequisites, it is essentially the Ministry of Defense's decision.

- Background and security check. Slovenia is a democratic country with no history of human rights abuses or war crimes. Before becoming a government employee or member of the military, one has to present proof of a crime-free police record. Therefore, our task in ensuring that candidates for training pass the required background check is an easy one. The ODC prepares a form which the Ministry of Defense signs, verifying that the student does not have a questionable background. Other offices within the embassy, such as the regional security office, are available to provide further validation of the candidate.

- Medical screening. All Ministry of Defense employees and service members have a medical screening every two to three years. Furthermore, there is an internal requirement that before traveling abroad, each person has to undergo a mandatory screening. The only U.S. requirement that Slovenia had to add, at our request, was the HIV test. The Ministry of Defense, once again, provides us with a certificate ensuring that the required medical screening has been performed.

- Physical fitness and combat water survival tests. The tests are conducted when required by course prerequisites. The ODC chief, with the assistance of Ministry of Defense personnel and facilities, conducts them according to U.S. military standards.

- Uniforms. The students are provided a list of the uniforms required for their specific course and or schools, and are required to wear their Slovene uniforms. Exceptions include very specialized courses such as ranger and medical training, where students are issued the uniforms at the school.

- Salary. Students from Slovenia continue receiving their salary while in training in the U.S.

- Other allowances. Students attending training in the U.S. under the IMET program receive a modest stipend through the IMET program to pay for lodging, meals, and incidental expenses, much as the U.S. military receive per diem when traveling. This is to ensure that students with lower incomes than their U.S. counterparts can afford the expenses of living in the U.S. during their training. In addition, Slovene law requires that the Ministry of Defense pay each student who travels abroad a Slovene-funded per diem, regardless of the per diem received from IMET. Per diem for the U.S. is typically \$60.00 a day. When meals are provided, a student is entitled to 20 percent of the total per diem. The Ministry of Defense interprets this law so that they give the meals provided rate, \$12.00 a day, on weekdays, and full Slovene per diem on the weekends.

- Airline ticket. The IMET program pays for the student's airfare to the United States. By Slovene law, IMET students are entitled to one round trip ticket home if the training is at least four months in duration. They can receive up to three tickets if the training is longer than one year. Often, a student has no time to come home during training. Therefore, the ticket may be used by his or her immediate family member instead. Due to IMET prohibitions on short-term training for non-extended IMET courses, the Ministry of Defense pays the airfare for any student who will be in the U.S. for less than eight weeks.

The ODC is responsible for:

- English Comprehension Language (ECL) testing. In previous years, the ECL test was scheduled whenever needed and conducted by the ODC chief. In September 2000 the Defense Language Institute (DLI) coordinator position was opened. Since then, the coordinator, a U.S. government employee, is responsible for ECL testing. Recently, at the request of our point of contact at the personnel department, a fixed day for testing, the second Tuesday of every month, has been established to allow for easier planning.

- Visa. The student fills out the visa application form and we make arrangements with the U.S. embassy's consular office for his or her visa.

- Airline ticket. The office has obtained blanket round-trip waivers from the U.S. Army and Navy for purchasing round trip tickets for courses shorter than six months. From the Air Force we receive waivers on a case-by-case basis. Purchasing round trip tickets is very cost effective, saving thousands of IMET dollars for use in purchasing additional courses. The tickets are fully refundable, so even if the departure date or location changes, the ticket can be altered without cost.

- Advanced per diem. Although students can be paid their per diem in advance, we do so only when a course length is two weeks or less. Recently Slovenia has requested many short courses, not only E-IMET, but also regular IMET, for which it has to defray the cost of airline tickets. Based on the payment schedule, past students have received per diem at the end of the training, or not at all, during these short courses. Therefore, we decided to pay short, two weeks or less, course per diem in advance.

- Arrival information and international military student information (IMSI). Approximately two weeks before the report date. I send an e-mail to the international military student officer (IMSO) with the student's arrival information, date, flight number, and time of arrival, and required biographical data, the so-called IMSI.

- Prepare invitational travel order (ITO), and send it to the military department (MILDEP), IMSO and Slovenian defense attaché (DATT). The JSAT requirement is to send the invitational travel order to the school and MILDEP. We also decided to provide a copy of invitational travel order to the Slovenian DATT in Washington. We have learned that the MOD does not always inform the DATT of the Slovenes in training in the U.S., and since I send the ITOs electronically it adds no time or expense to include the DATT in the list of addresses.

- Pre-departure briefing. Because Slovenia is a small country, every student is able to come to my office for a pre-departure briefing. We always have two meetings. When the students come to my office for the first time they know very little about when and where they are going for training. We are working with the Slovenia personnel department in the MOD to ensure that students receive adequate notice as to when they will be starting their training in the U.S. Presently this is a weakness. At our first meeting, I provide the student with some very basic information students departure data and training location as well as information about the training and training installation.

- Student's departure date and training location.

- Course description and information on the training installation. The schools and military departments have, in most cases, done an excellent job of making our work easier with putting on-line a lot of information about the schools and courses available. Many have information tailored to international students available for downloading. Most of the Army and

the Navy and some of the Air Force schools have their own web pages, and I either print information or simply give a student the school's URL address, since most have internet access either at work or at home.

- Cultural differences. The students are provided with materials which makes them aware of the different customs, beliefs, courtesies and life styles in the U.S.

- Visa form and international military student information form are filled out.

- Money and credit cards. I have learned that the students are rather confused about the money they are going to receive while at training. Therefore, I make sure that they understand that there are two sources of funding, one is the per diem they receive from the Ministry of Defense, and the second is the IMET living allowance. I explain payment procedures in detail. The student is informed that he or she will receive the travel advance from the Ministry of Defense to cover initial costs and that it can take a few weeks before he or she receives the IMET per diem. I advise the students that it is very useful to have one of the major personal credit cards with them as well as a bank account where the IMET per diem can be transferred.

- Clothing. I advise the students of the general climatic conditions within the geographic area where they will be receiving training. The students receive a list of required uniforms or special clothing and equipment.

- Dependents and medical insurance. Even when authorized, Slovenian students rarely take their dependents with them for the duration of training. Most often they come for a short visit, up to one month. In any case, the students are informed that having dependents in the U.S. is very expensive, especially when they cannot stay on base. I emphasize how important is for the family members to get health insurance in case of medical emergencies since otherwise the students would have to cover all the medical costs. On the other hand I stress that additional health insurance is not required for the students, since all the charges for inpatient and outpatient care, immunization, and medical examinations are chargeable to the IMET program.

- Baggage allowance. The students are told how much luggage they are authorized. Baggage allowance, per the JSAT, is high and rarely limits the students.

- Driving. Slovenian students are authorized to buy or rent a car if they so desire. Of course this must be at no cost to the IMET program. They are advised to obtain an international driving license before leaving Slovenia, and encouraged to look into automobile insurance as well.

- Privileges. I inform the students about the privileges they and their authorized dependents are entitled to: shopping at the base exchanges and commissary, and their temporary membership in officers or noncommissioned officers clubs.

- Military status. I advise the students they will be treated in the same manner as their U.S counterparts. The international students are given the same privileges and, therefore, assume the same responsibilities as U.S. military personnel.

- Information on Slovenia. Despite being an independent country for ten years, Slovenia is not very well known in the U.S. From my personal experiences, I have learned how useful it is to bring some maps and brochures about Slovenia. I wish the MOD would provide this material to the students, but since this is not the case, I suggest they get this material, free of charge, at the Slovene Tourist Board.

At our second appointment, which is usually two or three days before the departure, the student receives:

- The airline ticket. I always check if the student has been in the U.S. before. If not, and it seems like the student feels uncomfortable about going so far away from home, I explain in great detail the overseas flight and the procedures at the U.S. Customs and Immigration offices.
- Advance per diem. When course duration is at least two weeks, the student receives advance per-diem.
- Invitational travel order. I explain the invitational travel order to the students from paragraph to paragraph, because I think it is important for student to be familiar with it, since the invitational travel order is the document which determines what the student is authorized to do. I repeat once again the most important facts that I want the students to remember, such as per diem, how much baggage is authorized, which uniforms to take, what to do in case of medical emergency, how much leave can be taken if authorized (thirty days at no cost to U.S. government and IMET program). The students get the original and four copies of the invitational travel order, while the Defense Language Institute students get fifteen copies.
- The international military student officer's name, address, phone number. I tell the students they will be met at the airport by the international military student officer. The student is given the name and phone number so that in the case of a flight delay the student can contact him/her from the airport. In my opinion, having the name of the person who is going to meet them in the U.S. gives the student a feeling of security. I explain to the students that the IMSO will assist them and if problems arise they should bring them to the IMSO's attention.
- ODC's phone number and e-mail. The student is reassured that they should feel free to contact me in case some problem arises that cannot be resolved by the international military student officer at the school. I also ask them to send me a quick e-mail when they arrive to the school.
- Weather report. Usually the students find this information on-line themselves, but in case they do not, I give them a weather report for a few days in advance.
- Pre-paid phone card. Making phone calls home is very expensive, therefore the student receives an example of a military prepaid card and a commercial phone card.
- Instructional material. The students are advised that at the end of the training their instructional materials will be shipped to the ODC office address, where they can pick it up.

Upon return to Slovenia, the students come for debriefing and pick up their instructional materials. The debriefing is oral and the students are encouraged to talk about their positive and negative experiences in the U.S. and how useful they found the training. I stress that their feedback is critical to helping me ensure that we continue to improve the student administration process, and provide for an even higher-quality experience for future students.

Conclusion

I consider student processing, especially the pre-departure briefing, to be the most important part of my job. The effectiveness of my briefing directly affects people and impacts the success of the mission. Who cares if I file a memorandum in the wrong folder? On the other hand, what if I send a student to the wrong school without the proper uniforms? There is no doubt in my

mind that the way a training manager prepares a student for training in the United States can have an enormous influence on the overall training experience for that student.